

Cyberbullying on Weibo and the Ineffectiveness of Its Anti-cyberbullying Policies in Prevention and Regulation of Cyberbullying—Investigation into Liu Xuezhou's Case

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Abstract: Social media platforms' policies aim to restrict cyberbullying. However, there is little study on whether these policies are effective. The primary aim of this paper is to investigate the effectiveness of the Weibo policy between 2012-2022 against cyberbullying and find a way to strengthen its effectiveness. We studied the Case of Liu Xuezhou, which is a typical example of cyberbullying. By studying the case and analyzing how relevant policies of Weibo worked or failed in preventing the case, this research found that although Weibo does have a policy to prevent cyberbullying, they are delayed and ineffective. Thus, when netizens encounter cyberbullying, the policies against cyber violence have little power in preventing its happening or help reducing the harm suffered by victims. Weibo, as one of the biggest social media platforms in China, should strengthen the prevention and regulation of cyberbullying by increasing the effectiveness of these policies' terminology and enforcement. Meanwhile, netizens should improve their ability to distinguish between right and wrong and participate in the prevention of cyberbullying themselves.

Keywords: Anti-cyberbullying, Policy, Analysis, Chinese social media, Liu Xuezhou

1. Introduction

Weibo is a popular social media widely used in China. It is a community designed to update social, recreational, and political news. However, as information can spread more freely and immediately on social media platforms without much regulation, negative issues like cyber fraud and cyberbullying take place on Weibo frequently [1]. With an immature system of preventing and regulating cyberbullying, lots of cyberbullying events that lead to suicide of victims have occurred. This report aims to analyze the anti-cyberbullying policies of Weibo and its inadequacy oversight which could lead to potential uncontrollable cyberbullying. This report applied the case of Liu Xuezhou, a young life who committed suicide after being attacked in massive cyberbullying against him. The inappropriate usage of Weibo by users and the inability of Weibo to resolve cyberbullying cases like

this in a timely manner played a role in Liu's death. Based on the case study, we offer five recommendations to improve the policy on Weibo social media system.

2. Case Study

2.1. The Death of LiuXueZhou

The following description of the event is based on the investigation report by Wang Xizong [2]. Liu Xuezhou (Liu) was born in 2006. Liu Xuezhou's biological parents sold their three-month-old child to a gang of three traffickers who resold him to his later adoptive family. On December 6, 2021, Liu posted a family search video on Weibo in order to find his biological parents, which later received heated attention from netizens. With police and netizens' help, Liu found his biological parents. However, on January 16, 2022, Liu found out that his birth mother had blocked him on a messaging app WeChat (an equivalent of WhatsApp), so he began to ask for legal assistance on Weibo.

On the night of January 17, Liu's biological father and mother began to slander Liu, stating that Liu's search for his parents was just for real estate property under their name. Such statements signaled the beginning of the cyberbullying against Liu. Led by Xinjing News, various major media outlets took Liu's case out of context for the sake of attention, portraying Liu as a son with despicable ambition for his biological parents' money and other property [2].

In the early morning of January 19, 2022, Liu decided to use legal means to protect himself from his parents' defamation and slander. However, online violence led by Weibo users further escalated as netizens willfully retweeted Liu's biological parents' words and hurled abuse and attacks at Liu one after another. Finally, on January 24, 2022, Liu chose to end his life in Sanya, Hainan Province of China [2].

After this case, the police intervened to investigate and arrest these traffickers who were selling the child. Online platforms also have begun to add policies to combat online violence on a large scale. According to the event's development, the case can be divided into three parts—The early stage, the middle stage, and the end stage of the event.

2.2. Cyber Violence Against Liu

As mentioned above, when his tragic life of being trafficked and his desire to have a loving home were shown on Weibo, netizens launched a heated discussion. While some expressed concern and comfort for him, many others questioned and maliciously speculated about him. And the malicious speculation eventually led to the death of this teenager.

The cyber violence that led to Liu Xuezhou's death came from three aspects: Firstly, his biological parents deleted Liu Xuezhou's contact information after being accused by netizens for abandoning their child. To get rid of public criticism, his biological parents used Weibo and other social media to fabricate rumors and deliberately smear Liu [2]. In addition, the traffickers who bought and sold Liu Xuezhou at that time were later convicted and punished, thus their families held a grudge against Liu Xuezhou, so they took the opportunity to retaliate against him and also carried out cyber-violence against Liu Xuezhou.

Secondly, to jockey public attention, some unscrupulous media took this opportunity to mislead the public opinion by promoting false information, which was also a key factor leading to Liu Xuezhou's suicide, as documented by Wang Xizong [2].

Lastly, there was a large number of netizens who willfully and personally attacked Liu Xuezhou based on false information and herd mentality without full awareness of the case. Some malevolence expressed in their comments exceeded Liu's psychological tolerance and deeply harmed him [2].

2.3. Platform Operation Mechanism of Weibo

As the leading platform driving this case, there are many mechanisms that can fuel spread of rumors and cyberbullying against Liu on Weibo:

(1) People can pay for trending topics and delete some trending hashtags on Weibo. The content of the platform's trending has not been confirmed as authentic, so this platform only reflects capital, not public opinion, and often whichever company or media gives it more money has the right to control opinion on Weibo. In this case, netizens and news media paid online water forces to discredit Liu Xuezhou and make their opinion dominant. Liu Xuezhou with his own power could not possibly fight with the powerful capital. Many netizens browsed Weibo just to see the headlines and did not dig into the story, so there were many misunderstandings about Liu Xuezhou's case because they had access to information against him.

(2) Before the private message function of Weibo was revamped, in this case netizens could directly send insulting messages in private messages to inflict cyber violence on Liu Xuezhou, seriously disturbing his normal life. This function was modified on June 22, 2022: users who do not follow each other can only send one private message to each other.

(3) On Weibo platform, cyber traces can be eliminated. For example, the person who has cyber bullied others can delete the relevant cyber-violent comments before they are taken into evidence. Weibo users can delete other people's comments to their own tweet, such as opinions that differ from their own, etc. Such a comment mechanism does not play a role in public opinion monitoring at all. That is, they do not objectively and comprehensively reflect the views of the public because the publishers of the microblogs can control their content. In this case, some accounts that spread rumors about Liu Xuezhou to gain attention deleted their content conveniently, so it is difficult to hold them accountable.

These problems with Weibo's cyberbullying cases are closely related to its platform policies, the following analysis and research are conducted from this perspective to explore why these policies are ineffective in addressing online violence.

2.4. Weibo Policies' Ineffectiveness in Liu's Case

In the early stage, Weibo clearly states in the Weibo Community Convention Article 19 and 36 [3]: "Weibo prohibits users from publishing or forwarding relevant content involving the privacy of minors, regardless of whether or not the person, parents or other guardians consent, and upon discovery the station will immediately delete the relevant information."

"Users are prohibited from posting undesirable information. Bad information includes but is not limited to: (a) malicious marketing 3. warfare: creating trouble or misinterpreting the original content intended to intensify conflicts, causing different groups to attack each other. 4. other acts that infringe on the legitimate rights and interests of individuals or units in order to obtain traffic and profit."

Although the Weibo community convention clearly stipulates that the privacy rights of minors cannot be violated and that neither media accounts nor personal accounts can be maliciously marketed, Liu's incident occurred and worsened because major unscrupulous media outlets spread rumors released by Liu's biological parents without verification in order to gain traffic and profit. Moreover, as a 17-year-old minor, Liu's information and private life were spread all over the world, and Weibo did not take effective measures to defend the legal rights of this minor during this period.

In the middle stage of Liu's development, more and more netizens forwarded retweeted the posts of unscrupulous media because they could not verify the authenticity of the information and were reluctant to think of the consequences of their behavior, leading to a massive cyber violence against Liu. However, according to Weibo's policy article 27, 30 and 33 [4]:

“Users shall not publish harmful information on current affairs. Current affairs harmful information includes information that endangers national and social security according to current laws and regulations, mainly as follows (vii) spreading rumors, disturbing social order and destabilizing society.”

“Media accounts and government accounts are important subjects involved in the publication and discussion of current affairs information and social information: (a) media accounts should ensure the authenticity of news content, using the advantages and characteristics of social media to strengthen the review of the authenticity of news content.”

“Users shall not publish illegal information. Illegal information includes but is not limited to: (a) information containing information that disturbs public order, obstructs public safety, infringes on personal rights, property rights, and obstructs social management content.”

After Weibo made the above clear regulations, most of the media still did not comply with the "ensure the authenticity of the news" rule, and there was no punishment except being asked to delete fake tweets. Xinjing News, one of the first media outlets to start spreading rumors against Liu, was not punished in any way, nor did it apologize. At the same time, Weibo did not effectively stop the spread of rumors. The topics related to Liu's incident reached over 3 billion readers, which shows how fast Weibo spreads information and how widely it is read. The spread of rumors about Liu has seriously violated Liu's personal rights and safety.

After the suicide of Liu, the irreversible damage had been done, and many netizens expressed their pity for the loss of a life on the platform. At the same time, netizens spontaneously began to blame some unscrupulous media for spreading rumors and Liu's biological parents for their cold bloodedness. However, little has been said on Weibo's anti-cyberbullying policies' inadequacy in preventing and regulating the case.

3. Policy Analysis

Although Weibo keeps introducing new policies to stop cyberbullying, such as the introduction of real-name system, cyberbullying is still getting worse with increasing numbers and severity [5]. One of the dominating reasons is the Weibo policy: the policies have failed to prevent cyberbullies but made Weibo a breeding ground for online violence.

3.1. Easy Access to Get Around Real-Time Authentication and Alt Account

Firstly, although a real-name system was required for Weibo registration, it only asked for users' phone number and email address for registration, rather than real names on their ID [5]. Therefore, Weibo accounts are not bound with real IDs. Alt accounts are easy to create or trade, which is also the main reason for the difficulty of carrying out follow-up penalties. In this case, Liu Xuezhou said: "More than 90% of the abusive remarks are sent from alt accounts and private accounts." [6]. In Liu's cases, users who have participated in the cyberbullying cannot be traced to a real person, and it is convenient for them to buy alt accounts and remain anonymous on Weibo.

3.2. Difficult Reporting System

Secondly, Weibo states that their online complaint system only handle complaints with simple and clear facts, while complaining or reporting cyberbully require reporting of abusers with supporting documents to file a complaint through a manual channel by the victim [7]. These complaints usually take up to 5-7 days to process, and the results are often unsatisfactory: most complaints are dismissed for lack of evidence, and the few that are successful are dealt with by mere deletion of a message and a short ban on the account involved in the cyberbullying [8]. The high cost of reporting is why

cyberbullies is difficult to stop during the process of cyber violence, and in the face of numerous cyberbullies, victims usually do not have enough time and energy to report them one by one.

3.3. Light Punishment

The third, and the worst weakness of Weibo's anti-cyberbullying policy is the ineffectiveness of its punishment mechanism. Although Weibo says that users can seek relief through the complaint channels or judicial channels provided by Weibo when their legitimate rights and interests are infringed, practical action and punishment are absent. Weibo classifies information as illegal and undesirable. Illegal information includes political content, pornographic content, drug content, gambling content, etc., insulting messages are classified as undesirable information, whose punishment is much milder than illegal information, and usually reporting is hardly effective.

In Article 15 of the Weibo Complaint Operation Rules [9], it is written that cyberbullies after complaints may face content and account processing, and the processing of content includes but is not limited to deleting, blocking, and banning from being retweeted, banning from being commented on, etc. The consequence of the account includes but is not limited to prohibiting the release of tweets and comments, prohibiting being followed, prohibiting the modification of account information, restricting access until closing, and canceling the account, etc.

We can see that the most severe punishment is just a ban on the account [10]. Considering how easy it is to get an alt account for Weibo, as mentioned in the pre-case section, this punishment is not a deterrent. In a case as serious and deadly as Liu Xuezhou's Case, Weibo's response only resulted in the suspension of over 1,000 users who sent private messages bullying the victim during this period, as well as the removal of 290 pieces of the offending content, which was obviously too late and easy comparing to the harm the victim has received [11]. For online abusers, most of the time, losing an optional account never stops their malicious action since they can easily get another alt account and carry out the next online violence.

3.4. Vague and Unclear Terminology

Apart from easy access to alt accounts and mild deterring effects, the current terminology of the policies is vague and unclear. According to Weibo community policies, officially modified by 2021, the context that “influences, threatens, and induces user’s psychological and mental health”, and “forces seduce, and teaches underage to participate in gangsterdom events” have been prohibited [14]. However, the terms are too vague to define languages’ aggressiveness. The boundary of what terms can be clarified as violating community rules left the bullies lots of chances to imbed irreversible trauma to victims and get away from the responsibilities. An example according to the fifth chapter in the Detailed Rules and Regulations for Complaint (n.d) [12], Weibo has been extremely unclear about the differences between different degrees of insult, as well as defining what should be identified as an insulting. “Insulting and abusing, unfriendly statements, and promoting hostility and discriminations” are the only categories Weibo regulated as attacking. This will be inefficient when dealing with implicit attacks, such as verbal insults, images of abuse, and life-threatening messages sent directly to victims. According to sciencedirect.com, cyberbullying has risen suicidal thoughts by 14.5%, and suicidal rates by 8.7% [13]. It is clear that, without effective regulation, cyberbullies, which are both mentally and physically damaging to victims, will continue on social media like Weibo.

3.5. Absence of Effective Information Verification Agency

In addition to vague terminology of the policy, the absence of an information verification agency fuels the diffusion of rumors and fake news. In Liu’s case, many internet users started rumors based

only on Liu's mother's statement and kept spreading fake information. More and more people participated in insulting Liu for things he has never done before. If there had been a verification agency to inform that the rumors against Liu was groundless, the spread of rumors against Liu could be less wide. In fact, Weibo did enact the Rumor System to handle spreading of rumors on its platform. The Rumor System of Weibo is a system created by Weibo to deal with various rumors that possibly bedding cyberbullying, involving the hashtag #weiborefusion and an official account. The intention of having the system is marvelous, however, the system failed to achieve its designated function. This account is expected by the public to denounce rumors and clarify for the victims in severe cases such as Liu's case, but it is engaged in clarifying inessential rumors such as 'smart drug has no authentic use for improving school grades' and 'the picture of twenty-seven pandas climbing on the same tree was photoshopped'. But in Liu's case, the system did not intervene in any way. As a result, the rumor clarification system failed to clarify rumors for those who genuinely need it; also, its poor performance will also gradually decrease its authenticity and effectiveness. Given these, Weibo still has a long way to go in cyberbullying incidents prevention and regulations.

4. Recommendation

After analyzing the case, detailing the Weibo policies and illustrating the severity of the current cyberbullying phenomenon, this report puts forward the following suggestions to create a healthier online environment.

4.1. For Weibo

(1) Strengthen public awareness toward cyberbullying and the guiding role of mainstream media. As a mainstream media platform, Weibo has the responsibility in guiding public opinion towards events and issues published and discussed on its platform. Education on the consequences of cyberbullying, how to distinguish cyberbullying and how to stop cyberbullying should be in place, in the format of an online seminar or discussion forum.

(2) Strengthen the review of Weibo content and timely suppress the spread of rumors. Weibo platforms should establish an effective mechanism to deal with rumor spreading and strictly review the information that may trigger widespread rumors [14].

(3) Block insulting messages in weibo comments. Platforms have a legal right to audit each content and comment. If they find vulgar and illegal comments, such as dirty talk and exposure of private information, they could hide these kinds of tweets and warn users who publish the content. At the same time, platforms should pay attention to the use of language conversions that aim to avoid the supervision of the platform, such as word homonyms, abbreviations and so on.

4.2. For Institutes and Individuals

(1) Educational institutes, public or private, to educate users proper ways of Internet use. First of all, institutes, organized by government body or non-government body, could host campaigns on civilized use of social media to help establish a civilized Internet environment. Secondly, schools can also conduct some legal education about the network and the mentality of Internet users, such as lectures, so that people will understand some basic rules of the Internet and its users. Finally, parents should teach their children to respect people from different backgrounds no matter their race or health condition. Therefore, children could empathize with people instead of taking pleasure from insulting others, which helps them to treat everyone equally and comment nicely on the Internet [15].

(2) Individuals improve media literacy and ethics, and distinguish information authenticity. As mentioned above, many netizens hurt others without knowing the real reason for the incident, which added insult to injury for Liu who was already frustrated. Therefore, netizens should improve their

media literacy and discriminate content rationally and learn to distinguish right from wrong and seriously think about the authenticity of news online. Only after they have known the truth of events, they can say what is fair, instead of starting to say what they know only partially. This can reduce the burden of network violence for the main character of the event.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, we focused on the case of a Chinese teenager, Liu Xuezhou, who committed suicide after being subjected to cyber violence in search of his biological parents, to analyze the effectiveness (or lack of it) of Weibo's anti-cyberbullying policies. Currently, these policies did not succeed in preventing the occurrence of the cyber violence because they could not hold users accountable for their behavior online: with easy access to alt accounts, no severe punishment for participation of spreading rumors and attacking others online, Weibo cannot prevent cyberbullying from the beginning. In addition, without little intervention, time-consuming reporting system and verification of information, Weibo's policy cannot regulate attackers' behavior during the cyberbullying process. In short, the current Weibo anti-cyberbullying policy and regulation system are inadequate, and possible cyberbullying cases will continue to rise in the future. Based on the case study, we suggest ways to reduce the occurrence of cyber violence on social media by formulating a more effective policy body and regulation system, as well as educating its users to better the overall social media platforms.

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Nuo Li completed paragraphs 2.2, 2.3, and the conclusion; Tinglu Feng finished paragraphs 2.1, 2.4, and the abstract. Together, they combined into our 2.0 Case Study part. Xingyu Xu compiled paragraphs 3.4, 3.5, introduction, and acknowledgment. Haoxuan Sun edited paragraphs 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, reference page, table of contents, compiling, language polishes, and final check. Together, structured our 3.0 Policy Analysis section. Ruilin Guo completed the 4.0 recommendations section in our paper. Haoxuan Sun should be considered the First author.

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